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HONORS THESIS

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Asian and Asian American Representations in American Film

The purpose of this paper is to explore the racist representations of Asians and Asian Americans in film that serve to enhance white supremacy. I will examine the initial depictions of Asians by white actors and actresses, the impact of U.S. foreign and domestic policy on the portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans, the various stereotypes that evolved out of a racist and sexist milieu, the impact of the yellow peril on the development of stereotypes in film, and the way that stereotypes are gendered and sexualized. Also, I will examine two films from different eras, and will deconstruct the stereotypes and themes. It is important to acknowledge the impact such stereotypes have on actual people, and as a result I have included Lee's interviews with Asian American actors and my interviews with Asian and Asian American individuals.

The presence of certain stereotypes in film serves as a record of prejudice toward Asians and Asian Americans. Such stereotypes promote an ideology that validates certain practices toward racial minorities. In her article *Ethnicity, the Cinema and Cultural Studies*, Gina Marchetti (1991) wrote "Hollywood has the power to define difference, to reinforce boundaries, to reproduce an ideology which maintains a certain status quo." In order to deconstruct racism in society, we must examine the various ways which such prejudice has been manifest.[1]

[1] Cultural studies effectively examines the intersection between race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. However, at this point in my research I examined the connection the racial stereotypes and gendered racial stereotypes separate from their potential connection to other aspects of identity.

Eugene Franklin Wong points a finger at mass media for promoting racist stereotypes of minorities in society (1978). According to Wong, films have the power to socialize the American public and to define social norms (1978). Wong writes:

> Stereotypical delimitations, which have been created, established and maintained by whites in the motion picture industry, present a property that is not only responsible for retaining a finite set of character depictions, as opposed to the unlimited potential for whites, but also accountable for the institutionalizing of racist stereotypes(1978).

Wong criticizes the traditionally incorrect and stereotypical depictions of Asian characters and themes in American film. Repetitions of such stereotypes in film over the years have served to strengthen their perceived validity by the viewing audiences, and subsequent generations are more likely to tolerate the degrading images (Wong 1978).

In the earlier days of film, Asians were portrayed by Caucasian actors and actresses. White actors who played Asian characters in films include: Katharine Hepburn in *The Dragon Seed* (1944), Richard Barthelmess in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), and Shirley Maclaine in the film *My Geisha* (1962).[2] There were many other white actors who played leading roles as Asians, while actual Asian people were relegated to minor background roles.

Many steps were taken to "Orientalize" white actress Shirley Maclaine for her role in *My Geisha* (Wong 1962). Cosmetologists would mix together plaster and pour it into a wax "impression" of her eyes. After the plaster hardened, clay was used to carve an eye in the "desired Oriental shape." Ultimately, the cosmetologists would "bake rubber eyepieces fashioned from the clay additions" (Wong 1978). The procedure would take four days, and at that point Maclaine would go back to the lab where the eye-pieces were glued-on. Also, the cosmetologist attached an "invisible flesh-colored plastic tab to the

[2] Other famous actors and actresses included Mary Pickford, Boris Karloff, Myrna Loy, Lana Turner, Fred Astaire, Paul Muni, Louise Rainer, Marlon Brando, Jerry Lewis, and more (Ghymn, 135).

skin near each of her temples" to pull her skin up (Wong 1978). Rubber bands were connected to the tabs, and were hidden beneath a wig.[3] Maclaine also disguised her blue eyes with brown contact lenses and wore a great deal of stage make-up.

As the above explanation illustrates, tremendously complicated steps were taken to "Orientalize" whites, which is called "yellowface" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). Countless individuals have criticized "yellowface" as being racist or inauthentic. According to Esther Ghymm, Maclaine's "stately figure and broad shoulders do not resemble a Chinese woman in any credible way. Her Bostonian accent does not sound Chinese" (2000).

Asian actors and actresses suffered from the presence of "yellowface" because they weren't able to find work in the motion picture industry, and the job possibilities they had were limited by the stereotypical and racist roles.[4] Wong criticizes the "institutionalization of racist cosmetology in the motion picture industry," and points out the hypocrisy "permitted by the industry" that does not allow Asians "with or without comparable cosmetic attempts, to portray white characters" (1978).

Watchdog groups like NAATA (the National Asian American Telecommunications Association) were established to "monitor Hollywood images" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004). Although "yellowface" makeup has been challenged by consumer groups, white actors are still featured in leading roles in films that explore Asian themes. *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) are two films

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[3] In her article *The Long March—From Wong to Woo: Asians in Hollywood,* Tiana Thi Thanh Nga wrote: "Stars of European descent were entrusted with the plum parts, their eyelids hiked up so tightly it is a wonder they could find their marks on the sound stage floors" (1995).

[4] Prominent examples of such "yellowface" are found on Broadway, as well, as the main character in the play *The King and I* was played by Lou Diamond Phillips, who is part Latino (Lee 2001).

that perpetuate the white-as-protagonist rule. Another film, *Come See the Paradise* (1991), is a gross example of this phenomenon. The film focuses on a white protagonist even though the story takes place in a Japanese American concentration camp. The Media Action Network of Asian Americans (MANAA) criticizes the film because it relegates the interesting Japanese American characters "into the background of their own history" (www.manaa.org). Yamamoto writes:

> *Come See the Paradise* hinges its superficial exploration of the internment of Japanese Americans on a romantic narrative that ultimately renders the Asian American subject invisible while refiguring white racism as an anomalous character flaw, instead of as a pervasive ethos (2000).

Many of the stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans in film are gendered. *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) is a seminal educational film that shows a feminist perspective on stereotypes of Asian females through sixty years of "consistently simplistic and inaccurate" images in media and film (Tajima 1989). *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) can be used effectively to identify various ways that media images have shaped the way society at large sees Asian women, where such images originated, and how they impact the way some Asian women might perceive themselves (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003).[5] *Slaying the Dragon* asserts that racial prejudice and sexism have influenced the way that Asian and Asian American women are depicted in films.

Slaying the Dragon exposes two key depictions of Asian women in film. The first image is that of the "Dragon Lady" who is "an evil amoral vamp" (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003). Dragon Ladies are sexy, wicked criminals (Tajima 1989). The Dragon Lady was introduced in comic strip form in 1934 by Milton Caniff. Caniff used

[5] In the article *Confronting Gender Stereotypes of Asian American Women: Slaying the Dragon*, Marilyn C. Alquizola and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi suggest ways to use the film as an educational tool in college classrooms. A viewing of the film should follow a review of "racial prejudice, racial stereotypes, and elements of 'racial formation theory" (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003).

the Dragon Lady to provide a female embodiment of the white society's fear of Asians and Asian Americans. According to Caniff, the Dragon Lady is "one who combines all the best features of past mustache twirlers with the lure of the handsome wench" (Hoppenstand 1992). The Dragon Lady character is both titillating and dangerous, and she disguises "anti-white race hatred in the mutually reinforcing 'duplicity' of being Asian and being woman" (Liu 2000). The Dragon Lady is seen to have "treacherously enticing wiles" (Liu 2000).

The second image of Asian women in film presented in *Slaying the Dragon* is that of the "Lotus Blossom." In *Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women*, Renee E. Tajima explains that the Lotus Blossom is a docile "sexual-romantic object" who accommodates white men (1989). Lotus Blossoms are "sexual playthings for Caucasians"[6] (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003). They are "utterly feminine, [and] delicate," and are also referred to as Geisha girls or China Dolls (Tajima 2003). Lotus Blossoms are sexually knowledgeable and pander to the needs of men.

Both the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom are highly sexualized, exotic objects in American culture in novels, plays, mainstream Hollywood films, porn films, and magazines, and subsequently the "widespread perception of Asian women as inherently, exotically sexual is too often taken as fact" (Yamamoto 2000). The objectification and commodification of these women's bodies does not provide visibility for them as individuals (Yamamoto 2000).

One prominent Asian American actress who dealt with stereotypes was Anna May Wong. Anna May Wong began playing small roles at age fourteen in 1919. When

[6] Interesting parallels can be drawn here between white men seeking out Asian women in Asian sex tourism and mail order bride interactions.

she died in 1961, *Time* magazine described her as "the screen's foremost Oriental villainess"[7] (as cited by Liu, 2000). Wong is best remembered for playing a villainess in *The Oriental Express* (1924). In the film, she "glided through her scenes dressed in tight sleek black dresses as if she were the evil serpent in the Garden of Eden" (Ghymn 2000). Wong "oscillated" between playing the role of a victim and the Dragon Lady villainess. (Liu, 24 2000) According to Judy Chu (as cited by Liu 2000):

> in the past Anna May symbolized everything from cheesecake sexiness to exotic assimilation to droll camp. But Anna May is not just an object of the past; she is a very contemporary comment on the imposed roles of Asians in America and on the sexist expectations still internalized and acted upon by Asian women. With knowledge of her history, one finds that beyond the charming exotic imagery emerges an understanding and somehow closeness to the very real woman labeled the "lady of mystery."

When explaining why she left Hollywood, Anna May Wong said "I was tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that on the screen the Chinese are nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain—murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that" (Thi Thanh Nga 1995). Wong was "weary" of Asian characters that always "scheme, rob, [and] kill"[8] (as cited by Liu, 2000).

According to Yamamoto, Asian women's bodies are manipulated in film to appear more prominently than white women's. Asian women act as the "obverse of American ideality" while at the same time their depiction serves to gratify the heterosexual male gaze (Yamamoto, 2000). Camera angles are used to create a fetishistic view of Asian women's bodies. Additional criticism by Rana Kabanni (as cited in Hyun-Yi Kang, 2002) describes the view of the "oriental woman" as a physically desirable, sexually willing, and silent being who "lacked subjectivity and existed beyond the terms of Victorian morality" and whose body was "available without emotional or economic

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[7] AMPAS, quoted in Los Angeles Times, December 7, 1987
[8] LOC, *Photoplay*, March 18, 1937; AMPAS, *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1987

demands." The commodification of women's bodies is seen in films such as *China Gate* (1957), in which the main character "Lucky Legs" uses her sexual desirability and wiles to aid Westerners' cause of surviving in the Indochinese jungle (Marchetti 1993).

The perception of Asians and Asian Americans by the broader society impacts their depiction in motion pictures. The "climate of opinion" toward Asians and Asian Americans has changed in the United States (Oehling 1980). Asian immigrants suffered from discrimination and prejudice during the last quarter of the nineteenth century when large numbers of Chinese and Japanese people immigrated to the United States (Benshoff and Griffin 2004, Oehling 1980). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was legislation that disallowed the immigration of Chinese people, and thus a significant amount of the heterosexual Asian men who immigrated prior to the legislation were unable to find wives.[9] In some cases, Asian American men outnumbered Asian American women 25:1 (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). In general, Asians were excluded from immigration and citizenship rights by the Immigration Act of 1924, as well (Oehling 1980).

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, racist work laws led some Chinese men to find illegal ways to make money. Many organized into gangs called "Tongs" where they sold black-market items (Benshoff and Griffin 2004). From 1910 to 1930, conflict among Tongs to control the opium trade, gambling, or prostitution in Chinatowns was referred to as the "Tong Wars" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004). Newspapers capitalized on the conflict, and referred to the threat Asian immigrants represented as the "Yellow Peril" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004). The headlines in the *San Francisco Chronicle* post-1905 articulate the attitudes of some citizens towards Japanese immigrants: "Crime and poverty go hand in hand with Asiatic labor"; "Brown men are an evil in the public schools"; Japanese are a

[9] The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924

menace to American women"; "Brown Asiatics steal brains of whites" (As cited by Oehling, 1980).

During and immediately following WWII, there were changes in treatment and perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans (Oehling 1980). Many Japanese and Japanese American citizens were confined to concentration camps during WWII because of racism. More contemporarily, the animosity toward Japan (and those who appear to be Japanese or Japanese American) by automobile manufacturers in the late twentieth century has been explored in films such as the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (1988).[10]

The theme of Asian or Asian American criminality is seen in many films,[11] such as *The Yellow Peril,* (1908), *Mr. Foo* (1914), *The Yellow Menace* (1916), *Chinatown* Nights (1929), *The Hatchet Man* (1932) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1985). The film *Mr. Foo* was protested formally by the Chinese government, as the Chinese were shown as "lustful, vicious and immoral" (Wong 1978).

Asian and Asian American men are depicted either as sexually inadequate and effeminate eunuch figures that are unable to attract women, or as ruthless sexual threats to white women. Anti-Asian sentiment through the mid-1950's painted the Asian character as second-rate, depraved, lustful, and sly" (Ghymn 2000). For example, in the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991), the Asian criminal "forces himself upon a white woman and murders her" (www.manaa.org). Negative representations of non-white men

[10] As cited in the introduction to Hoppenstand's article, 1992.

[11] Some other well-known films including the yellow peril characters include the Flash Gordon series films *Perils From the Planet Mongo (1936), Spaceship to the Unknown (1936), Purple Death From Outer Space (1940), The Mask of Fu-Manchu (1932)* and *Gunga Din* (1939). (Hoppenstand 1992)

serve to enhance white patriarchal hegemony.[12] The threat posed by the Asian male easily can symbolize the danger of a rape of white society, as white women become a metaphor for the "the threat posed to Western culture as well as a rationalization for Euroamerican imperial ventures in Asia (Hoppenstand as cited by Marchetti 1993).

According to Wong (as cited by Cynthia W. Liu 2000), "Unlike the racist image of the threatening Asian rapist, white males are generally provided the necessary romantic conditions and masculine attributes with which to attract the Asian females' passion" because "in theory, non-white males have been positioned as threats...In practice, because of the subservience to white male social power, non-white males have been credited with non-masculine, effeminate characteristics." The Asian men were seen as hungering for both world domination and white American women (Hoppenstand 1992). Characters such as the "chink storekeeper" Cheng Huan, in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) are very effeminate. In the film, Huan did not sexually consummate his relationship with the young white woman he longed for, yet he aroused the anger of the girls' foster father, who came to get her.

In the mid-1880's, Asian men symbolizing the yellow peril were depicted as being like wolves, rats, or vultures (Hoppenstand 283, 1992). Also, Asians were seen as diabolical, conniving, and ruthless. According to Thi Thanh Nga, "...Hollywood's perception of the Asian seemed to have been derived directly from the nineteenth-century frontier view of Chinese as a subhuman species suitable for building levees, laying railroad track, doing laundry, or being dangled from the trees by those ridiculous pigtails"

[12] The demonization of the non-white male is problematic in Black/white race relations. Historically, the perceived sexual threat of Black males to the white females validated the prolific lynching of Black men.

(1995). These images were perpetuated in dime novels and pulp magazines, and later were reflected in movies.

One of the most prolific Asian male characters in classic Hollywood film is Fu Manchu. Anti-Asian sentiment, or yellow peril, and the presence of this "oriental villain" provided millions of Americans the opportunity to "vent their frustration and realize their racial fears" (Wong 1978). In 1912, stories of Fu Manchu, an evil Asian man who desired world domination, were first published in *Collier's Weekly* under the title *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (Hoppenstand 1992). The character Fu Manchu became the personification of the yellow peril, and he represented the tension between the morally pure and superior West and the "mysterious, seductively evil East" (Hoppenstand 1992). To get a visual of Fu-Manchu, Rohmer (as cited in Hoppenstand, 1992) instructed readers to:

> Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government—which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.

Fu Manchu's cruel and evil tendencies are captured in merciless acts. At one point he tortures a man who is dying of thirst by forcing him to drink salt water while a loud bell is simultaneously rupturing the man's eardrums (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). The Fu Manchu character-type was stolen by other filmmakers: The "Flash Gordon" serials (1936, 1938, and 1940) and a later film version (1980) use a Fu Manchu-like emperor called "Ming the Merciless" and the first James Bond movie *Dr. No* (1962) had an evil character based on Fu Manchu as well. Dr. No said to James Bond:

> I loved the death and destruction of people and things. I became adept in the technique of criminality—if you wish to call it that...It was a time of torture and murder and arson in which I joined with delight...(as cited by Hoppenstand 1992).

Both Fu Manchu and Ming were played by white actors in "yellowface" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004).

Asians and Asian Americans are rarely portrayed as "ordinary" people. Asian women, in particular, are not seen as "union organizers, or divorced mothers fighting for the custody of their children, or fading movie stars, or spunky trial lawyers or farm women fighting bank foreclosures..."(Tajima 1989). Hollywood relies on stereotypes to convey a predictable version of "Asianness." The Media Action Network of Asian Americans criticizes Hollywood's reliance on clichéd occupations like that of "restaurant workers, Korean grocers, Japanese businessmen, Indian cab drivers, TV anchorwomen, martial artists, gangsters, faith healers, laundry workers, and prostitutes" (http://www.manaa.org).

The erasure of individual Asians in film is problematic. According to Tajima, invisibility occurs when "individual personalities and separate identities become indistinguishable from one another" (1989). In particular, she describes scenes of "Asian masses" fleeing in the film *Krakatoa: East of Java* (1969) and the Vietnamese people running away in scenes from *Apocalypse Now (1979)* (Tajima 1989). A similar scene occurs in *China Gate* (1957).

According to Shimikawa, "the amalgamation of a wide range of ethnic communities descending from and including immigrants and refugees from various countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands through legal, social, and political racism" began before Asian Americans began to identify as such. (Shimikawa 2002) Yen Le Espiritu (as cited by Shimikawa 2002) remarks that "panethnic Asian Americanness was self-consciously produced as the result of a

confluence of anti-Asian hostility, demographic enumeration (that is, census categories), political protest, and coalition building that resulted in "reactive solidarities." However, the motion picture industry has not used the similarities that exist among Asians and Asian Americans as a means of combating racism. Instead, films often lump all Asians together, regardless of national origin, ethnicity, citizenship, etc. For instance, during World War I, when over 100,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were kept in concentration camps, non-Japanese Asian Americans were employed by the film industry to the roles of Japanese people. Prior to World War I, in the film *The Cheat*, (1915) the villain's ethnicity was changed in the inter-titles from Japanese to Burmese when the U.S. became an ally of Japan in World War I (Marchetti 1993).

The various representations of Asians in film can be better understood by examining the concept of Orientalism. According to Marchetti, the concept of Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Marchetti 1991). According to Benshoff and Griffin, Orientalism is "the way that Eurocentric and other White Western cultures imagine the idea of Asia" (2004). The portrayal of the "Oriental" represents the antithesis of European values.

In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), the main character Cheng Huan is orientalized. The silent film shows scenes with Huan in the temple of Buddha, in a dimly lit opium den, and in other exotic, foreign scenarios. He has a romantic relationship with a 12-year-old white girl in his apartment, and he gives her exotic silk clothing and burns incense to establish the mood.

The recurrence of the orientalized "other" enhances the "visibility/racial invisibility" of whites (Yamamato 2000). According to Yamamoto, the crafting of

whiteness is enabled only through ideologically sublimating white raciality with the help of the "other" (2000). French political theorist Guy DeBord (as cited by Yamamato 2000), explains the way images of Asianness are used: "signs of Asianness, orientalia, mark the cutting edge of or transgression beyond the border of normative whiteness." This is done by promoting the permanent status of Asians as the perpetually foreign, invisible other. Often Asian Americans are depicted in film Asian Americans as unable to assimilate into larger American society.

Asian American Actors

Racist representations and stereotypical images of Asians and Asian Americans have an impact on actors and actresses who are trying to establish or maintain their careers. In *Asian American Actors in Film, Television, an Ethnographic Case Study*, Joann Lee asks twenty Asian American actors and actresses how they "navigate the color line in theater, film or television, and how they deal with the "issue and barrier of race in an industry where physical appearance is a key factor to success." She also looks at how such challenges today differ from the past (2001). Lee interviews twenty Asian American actors about their experiences as racial minorities in a field where physical appearance and racial features are linked with success or failure. Lee's survey is meant to be interpreted as a case study, and not to be universal or definitive of the sentiments of all Asian American actors.

Many of the actors point out that the gendered differences close off certain roles to Asian or Asian American men. Men are often requested to try out for stereotypical parts, such as "Korean grocers, gangsters, immigrants, computer geeks, kung fu experts, and foreign businessmen" (Lee 2001). The opinions expressed in the case studies

promoted the idea that women had more opportunities for roles beyond stereotypes. Lee cited such roles to be "news reporters, business women, kung fu roles, and mothers..." (2001).

Solutions to enhance the opportunities available to Asian American actors include developing their own material, such as comedian Margaret Cho has done. Similarly, the actors called for more Asian actors on the screen so that they are not seen as "anomalies," permanently foreign, or the exoticized "other." One actor believed that a change in the cultural environment would impact the mass media. Quite obviously the viewing public would not tolerate images which they found to be inappropriate, and it is logical to think that if cultural values change, then the images appearing in films would have to be modified as well. The mass-marketing of films is based around profitability, and the rules that are "dictating opportunities for Asian American—and other actors—will remain chained to the draw of audiences to the box office" (Lee 2001).

A close examination of *China Gate* (1957) and *Year of the Dragon* (1985) indicate the ways these motion pictures uphold the racist Asian and Asian American stereotypes and in order to enhance white supremacy.

The film *China Gate* (1957) takes place in 1954 in Vietnam, and is dedicated to France's "noble" struggle to fend off the Communist threat. In the opening scenes we see indistinguishable hordes of Asian people rushing to receive the food as it is airdropped by American planes. The images of Asians are used to validate American imperialism and intervention, as the narrator says that the airdropped food is the Vietnamese people's "only chance for survival." The music and narration became ominous when the Japanese are mentioned, which illustrates the various ways certain Asian groups are demonized

while others are depicted positively. The Viet Minh are said to be "like children" who like to "play with guns" and have no rational ability to prevent being brainwashed by the Communists.

The female lead character is played by a white actress, Angie Dickinson. She plays a sexy Eurasian woman named Lia who is referred to as "Lucky Legs." Lia is said to run an opium den, live like a princess through prostitution, and she is considered by some to be a traitor to both France and China. Additionally, she is an alcoholic and a mother to a five year-old son. Lia agrees to assist the French troops navigate through the jungle on their mission to destroy a crucial Viet Minh weapon storage facility. She agrees to help the Western soldiers on the condition that they promise to take her five year-old son to America.

Lia had many characteristics of the Dragon Lady; she is duplicitous, scheming, sexy, and is perceived as to be lacking moral virtue. However, she is also seen as a Lotus Blossom-like character who is a committed mother and is in love with a white man. Lia has a son with a white American soldier called Blake, who is her husband at the time. Blake's extreme racism is reflected in his interaction with Lia when he is trying to justify his abandonment of his son. He said, "You know how I felt about half-caste kids. You didn't look like a thirty buck Chinese bride." Blake was dissatisfied with his son's appearance, and said, "When I saw his eyes, I got sick inside. They're so ugly. Chinese all the way down the line..." In the film, the young boy's eyes are repeatedly referred to as the "cross he's gotta carry."

The racist images in the film climaxed as Lia sacrifices her life to connect a fuse and explode the Communist weapon supply at China Gates area. Moments before Lia

dies, she is offered a proposition by an Asian Communist soldier who wants to marry her and take her son to Moscow. Lia symbolically rejects the East, and ends up killing the man by pushing him off a balcony in order to go aid the Westerners.

Lia repeatedly tolerates the violent, racist behavior of Blake, who consistently mistreats her throughout the film. The film serves to emphasize white supremacy and white male sexual superiority, the inevitable failure of interracial relationships, and the threat such relationships pose to biracial children. The Vietnamese people who rely on Western support are depicted as infantile in nature. These constructions have a gendered dynamic whereby the Western patriarchal cultures "conceived of eastern cultures as feminine or childlike in order to justify colonization and domination" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004).

Year of the Dragon (1985) was greeted by protests and picketing by a number of Asian American organizations and media groups (Marchetti 1991). Because of complaints about the film, the following disclaimer was added:

> This film does not intend to demean or to ignore the many positive features of Asian-Americans and specifically Chinese-American communities. Any similarity between the depiction in this film and any associations, organizations, individuals or Chinatowns that exist in real life is accidental. (Marchetti, 1991, 275)

In the article *Ethnicity, the Cinema and Cultural Studies*, Marchetti writes of the "stereotypical Asian drug kingpins and exotic 'China dolls" that any remotely sensitive viewer would find distasteful on the grounds of both racism and sexism (1991).

Year of the Dragon is an action-adventure film in which Polish-American police officer Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) passionately works to "clean up" Chinatown. His main opponent is the young and powerful Chinese American gangster Joey Tai (John Lone). White, the hero, feels morally justified to kill Tai, and "a great deal of the

ideological tension of this sort of plot revolves around who can and who cannot be assimilated into American society" (Marchetti, 1991).

The character Ariane (Tracy Tzu) is a young and attractive Chinese American journalist who captures the eyes of Stanley White. At times Ariane is a strong and self-respecting character. However, she ultimately succumbs to being the China Doll-type who disregards the racial slurs and personal attacks made by White moments before she sits naked on him and massages his chest. Toward the end of the film, Ariane is gang-raped by three young Chinese American men because of the threat she represents to Tai and other Chinese Americans due to her connection with White.

Year of the Dragon continues to enunciate the theme that interracial relationships are dangerous, and that Asian and Asian American women should be submissive to White men while succumbing to the men's overpowering sexual desirability. Ariane, like Lia, is in love with an abusive White man. The interracial relationships of Lia and Ariane are ended in the films by either death or sexual assault. Both women are seen as being strong at times, yet they are not strong enough to resist the potency of White male sexuality. To a modern viewer, this "sends the signal that Asian women are romantically attracted to white men *because they are white*. It insinuates that whiteness is inherently more important than any other romantic quality and inherently more appealing than any other skin color" (www.manaa.org). Both women are depicted as erotically as possible, and various camera angles are employed to satisfy the heterosexual male gaze.

Chinese American Joey Tai is depicted differently from Ariane. Marchetti argues that Tai's "nearly absent family and close association with other men in the text" connect the "threat of racial and ethnic difference to the threat of homosexuality, loss of male

power and privilege, and the weakening of gender boundaries" (Marchetti 1991). This blend of the sexual threat of the Asian man and the image of the eunuch or sexually inactive Asian male serve to enhance the sexuality of Stanley White. At the end of the film Stanley literally hunts down Tai and forces him to commit suicide. Marchetti describes the suicide as Tai's embrace of his "subordinate, feminized position." (Marchetti 1991).

Chinatown is exoticized in the initial scenes of the film, as the camera pans across a Dragons head, and shows lively Chinese New Year Celebrations (Marchetti 1991). The element of spectacle is described by Marchetti as "voyeuristic" (1991). The Chinese Americans in *Year of the Dragon* are portrayed as being ruthless, amoral, and hungry for power. Men in Chinatown represent a threat to the White power structure, and Stanley White acts as a crusader to protect society from the exotic and dangerous "other."

In conclusion, the persistent presence of Asian and Asian American stereotypes in film speaks to the racist treatment of such individuals by the dominant society. The ideologies presented in motion pictures serve to authenticate and reinforce such stereotypes, which plays into a cycle of racism. Although stereotypes themselves can be innocuous means of quickly advancing the plot of a film, the stereotypes explored in this paper are harmful. Asians or Asian Americans like Fu Manchu and the Dragon Ladies embody White societies' fear of the yellow peril, and justify the demonization of the unknown. Lotus Blossoms promote a concept of the Asian female body as an erotic ornament created to serve the white male. Similarly, the white male benefits from constructions of stereotypically emasculated or sexually menacing Asian or Asian American men.

In films like *Broken Blossom, China Gate*, and *Year of the Dragon*, Asian or Asian American characters serve to fulfill the needs of the dominant society; either by infantilizing an entire group of people to justify political intervention, establishing the foreignness of the "Orient," or by promoting a paradigm that simultaneously exoticizes and subjugates "Orientals. Exploration of these topics helps enable understanding of the impact racist stereotypes have on Asians and Asian Americans.

APPENDIX

Impact of Stereotypes and Racist Representations

I wanted to be sensitive to the impact on Asian Americans of Hollywood's depiction of Asians, so I spoke with four people on the subject. I have included their comments to provide more subjectivity to a topic that could easily have become impersonal. I have referred to them by the first letter of their first name to respect their privacy, and have included a bit of information on how they self-identify.

C. is an Asian American female who moved to the United States from China. When asked about Asian stereotypes in film, she said, "For Asian women you are either a sex symbol...more emphasis on very subservient, or you are a kung-fu master. Those are the most common or typical roles I see in Hollywood. ...I don't think there are too many roles for Asian American men except for those kung-fu roles. There was the kung-fu movies..." In regards to the challenges faced by Asian or Asian American men, she said "Bruce Lee struggled for a number of years. I think it's very hard for you to get a good role unless you're a kung-fu fighter like Chow Yun-Fat or Jackie Chan." Additionally, C. said, "I don't think there are too many movies about Asian Americans because of the market."

G. is a third generation Japanese American male. He said, "Men are seen as asexual and they're never the leading person, or they're the perpetual foreigner..." He commented on the impact negative stereotypes can have on individuals, and he experienced internalized racism when he was in high school. He said, "Internalized racism becomes this kind of self-hate." Stereotypes become believable, and "When you

don't have an opportunity to interact [with Asians], they're [the dominant society] just getting this one narrow view."

M. is a third generation Japanese American female. When asked how she would change the way Asians and Asian Americans are depicted in films, she said, "I think first we have to stop the kind of stereotypes that are based solely on our skin color. We have to play roles outside of restaurants, Chinatown, [and] martial arts." I asked her how she thinks stereotypes in films impact her, and she said, "I don't know if they're getting it solely from media. [The] assumption [is] that maybe I'm somehow exotic or that I'm so wedded to the traditional ways that I go home and become a Buddhist nun."

S. is a "resident alien" who immigrated to the United States from Japan. When asked what she thinks the most common representations of Asians or Asian Americans in film are, S said "Men want women to be a certain way because I'm female and Japanese. The stereotype is probably always exotic, submissive, gentleness."

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